

Letting Google do the Heavy Lifting – An Introduction to, and Review of Google Classroom

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In the spring of 2015, International Christian University (ICU) changed its internal web mail service to Gmail, in the process becoming an educational domain as part of Google Apps For Education (GAFE). With this move, some applications not available in a general Gmail account have become available to instructors at the university. The recent widespread implementation and use of Goggle Apps in the educational sphere here in Japan means applications such as Google Drive, Google Forms and others have become relatively well recognized and utilized in the educational community. However, as of the present, few instructors at ICU are familiar with Google Classroom, one of the newly available applications offered to instructors as part of the educational domain. In my exploratory trial of Google Classroom as a classroom management tool over the ICU Spring Semester, I have found it requires a short learning curve, and further, to offer many advantages in allowing teachers to reduce time spent on routine class management. Thus, the purpose of this article is to introduce the reader to Google Classroom, providing context for Google Classroom in the history of GAFE, and offering an overview of the applications and educational uses, in the prospect of spreading awareness and understanding of this digital tool.

Over the past ten years digital tools for education have made remarkable progress in moving from the province of those teachers who considered themselves, to use the favored insider self-expression, “techie (or techy)”, a word denoting someone who is skilled with computers and technology, to popular use by teachers in general. The advent and success of digital tools for educational use including cloud technologies, such as Google Drive and Google Groups, have provided so many advantages in terms of facilitating teacher tasks such as contacting student groups, handling class management, creating opportunities for collaborative work, and expanding the range of teaching and learning possibilities that even teachers who had not been formerly comfortable with, or interested in, computers and technology, have been, and are being, persuaded in

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considerable numbers, of the benefits of learning how to apply these educational and classroom management tools. As a result, in recent years, teacher Edtech (Educational technology) workshops have become regular, and well attended, components of educational conferences and teacher training. GAFE, described by Google on its Google for Education webpage as a “A Suite of Free Productivity Tools for Classroom Collaboration.” have recently become widely discussed here in the teaching community, as interest in the possibilities for using the tools has gained momentum among educators in general. In fact, GAFE was launched, according to the Google company history webpage, in 2006 at Arizona University. Furthermore, the Google company history site Our History in Brief tells us that, “Google Apps for Education has more than 25 million users, and is being used by 74 of the top 100 universities.” It would be fair to say that those numbers could be revised considerably upwards as of the present with interest in the GAFE tools on the upswing amongst educational groups. Google is well aware of the potential gains in having educational institutions around the world, from elementary to tertiary level, being involved with and a part of GAFE. Schools and students becoming more involved with GAFE and the range of Google services increases the internet traffic through Google and will generate even greater profits for the IT giant. Not only will Google be able to open up new areas of profit, but active involvement in facilitating and improving education will add to the stature and respect held for the company, as it has done for Apple. The potential of this market is seeing Google investing more in developing GAFE and allocating resources towards developing its education services, for example purchasing companies that may be of value in future markets, such as Launchpad toys, a company making classroom apps for younger learners. There are several reasons why the services are attractive for educational institutions. Most schools budgets are tight, and funding is a perpetual headache for school administrators. In addition to the many practical benefits available from utilizing GAFE in handling classroom management, these GAFE services from Google are appealing to educational institutions as Google offers them for free, as it also does many of its other services. Further, to enhance the spread of its GAFE tools, Google offers GAFE training through comprehensive programs such as the Google Teacher Academy, a highly competitive free two day professional development experience learning more about GAFE and instructional methods with 50 hand-picked teachers from around the world, at the end of which the participant is recognized as a Google Certified Teacher.

Google Classroom at ICU

Google Classroom appeared at ICU in the spring of 2015, when the university

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decided to change over to using Gmail as its internal email server and also to join Google's GAFE group as an educational domain. This allows instructors access to Google Classroom, a tool only available to GAFE participants at the present. Organizations, such as ICU, participating in GAFE have the administrative authority to block certain services in concerns related to, for example, regulation of student personal information. For example, in the current ICU GAFE setup, students are unable to access certain applications such as Google+ communities, and there are some limits on the actions domain Gmail users are able to access when sending files and folders to addresses outside the domain, although in most cases there is no restriction with files being sent into the domain. This has caused some initial confusion, as in the past teachers have used the regular apps offered by Google through a regular Gmail account, in which all users (in this case, both teachers and students) were able to access all of the same tools. To further complicate the situation, in the current ICU setup, instructors and students have a different set of apps, meaning teachers need to check which applications students can use before building the use of those apps into their lessons and class interaction. My own investigation seems to suggest that ICU is not unusual in its control and guarded approach to management of the services offered to its educational domain users. These controls are often in place due to concerns over the possible leakage of private information and inappropriate use of the services. In ICU, as the GAFE domain is new, the current stance is a cautious one considering such matters as whether or not students should be able to use applications in the ICU domain for actions such as coordinating club meetings and other non-academic activities and events. There is a continued and spirited discussion as to which services teachers (and students) should have access to, in order to best serve our teaching needs, and as the university gains in experience with the new domain further applications may be opened up for student users.

Testing it Out

Senior Lecturer Ken Enochs and I both experimented using Google Classroom to manage our English for Liberal Arts (ELA) classes over the Spring Semester, making several visits to our respective offices with stories of success and problems in using Google Classroom. I also spent considerable amounts of time everyday reading through the Google Classroom Help Center, posts made by members of the Google Classroom Google+ community, and suggestions offered by the Google Classroom Experts team. There are also several websites which offer excellent advice and creative applications of using Google Classroom, perhaps the best being the sites run by Alice Keeler, for example her site *50 Things You Can do With Google Classroom*. For teachers looking for

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further ideas you can consult her *35 More Things You Can do With Google Classroom*. The result of this work was a Guide to Google Classroom folder with detailed instructions on how to use the application, and ideas on how to facilitate using it in ELA classes, and a student manual. In September, a Google Classroom workshop was held with several teachers in attendance, and I further offered and held several small group or individual Google Classroom introduction sessions. My own experience and general feedback from teachers suggests that Google Classroom is an efficient tool for class management with a short learning curve, and considerably reduces the time spent in various routine tasks related to daily class organization and management.

Google Classroom Applied - The Online Essay

An example of how Google Classroom could be applied in ELA classroom and assignment management is in the flow of essay assignment, in reviewing and giving feedback, and returning and grading of the many essays we see over the semester. When assigning an essay in Google Classroom, the teacher first creates a template in Google Drive, uploads this to Google Classroom, and sends it out to all students using the make a copy for each student option. When the teacher creates an assignment a provisional deadline can be set for the first draft. As soon as the student receives the assignment as a notice in their email, they can go to their Google Classroom via a link and open the document. As the teacher has editing rights at all stage of the process, teachers are able to see student work on outlines, introductions, and other sections as the work evolves. Feedback can be given to students immediately and directly, greatly enhancing the feeling of immediacy, and of a dialogue between the student and teacher. Once the first draft has been returned, the teacher can adjust the deadline for the second or final draft. When grading and giving feedback on essays the teacher can view a thumbprint of each essay in a single window, easily locating student work. I used this style of essay management in the 2015 Autumn Semester with two sections of Academic Reading and Writing (ARW) and felt that managing this process through Google Classroom improved my efficiency greatly. In past semesters I have used Google Drive to have students share their essay with me, however the automatic sharing of documents in a centralized location seems to have made the process far less confusing for students.

The Tools in Google Classroom

For accustomed users of Google Apps learning to manage and apply Google Classroom is quick and straightforward, and is reasonably stress-free also for those who

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do not usually find learning new digital tools an easy process. The interface is simple, and currently tools are few in number. Google Classroom primarily works handling classroom management tasks with functions such as contacting students through group announcements, posting resources, assigning tasks, creating question forums, and transmitting teacher feedback. Google Classroom also automates the submission, returning and grading of an assignment, which is all done online, reducing paper use and also saving considerable time spent on collection and returning of work. Google Classroom provides a relatively soft introduction into the GAFE tools in that the basic functions of setting up a class, sending announcements and creating and setting assignments can be learnt in as little as ten or fifteen minutes. The easy manner of mastering these basic tasks may provide a springboard for teachers who have formerly, perhaps been reluctant to become involved with GAFE (or other) digital tools, due to perception of a rather steep learning curve in learning to handle them. In a previous article, looking at the role of digital tools in education and digital tool related approaches, Rab Patterson (2015) referred to the need to increase awareness of the utility of digital tools in allowing teachers to become empowered and more in tune with their learners who are increasingly integrating digital experiences and devices into their lives. The simplicity and quickness in being able to master basic but essential classroom management tasks in Google Classroom may encourage an increasing number of instructors to consider using Google Classroom, and may also lead to an interest in other digital and GAFE tools.

Google Classroom offers three pages to work from, these being (a) Stream, (b) About, and (c) Student, with the teacher able to perform different classroom management tasks in each. For example, among the operations Google Classroom offers, is being able to, directly from Classroom, email individual students, a group of students, or the whole class in a few easy steps. Classroom also offers an option for the teacher to permit student comments on resources or assignment. For teachers who would like to encourage students to become a part of the course development itself, this offers an interesting option. In Stream teachers can send announcements out to the class, and set assignments with automated deadlines. Excuses for not handing in assignments won't work anymore with Classroom handling routine checking for teachers, confirming whether or not students are meeting the deadlines set for assignments. Uploading links, Drive documents, other files, and YouTube links for students can all be done easily and directly via the Stream interface. In About, instructors can up-load their syllabus and other important materials related to the course, allowing students who have missed classes to navigate to their Classroom, and download any classroom materials they may need, without having to contact the teacher via email for copies of class materials. Google

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Classroom facilitates collaborative work within the class by allowing teachers to post videos, articles and questions and then ask students to respond. Other students are then able to add comments, making for the possibility of a lively academic forum for discussion. With the mobile app students are able to participate in question forums on their Classroom while on the train, at home, or in a café. If a teacher wishes to post a certain announcement or assignment to more than one class, this is also conveniently one click away. A new feature just released allows teachers to be able to reuse old posts, permitting the teacher to repost previously created announcements and assignments without having to recreate the work from scratch. To make it easier to keep track of assignment deadlines, Google Calendar was integrated into Google Classroom from September 2015, automatically adding assignment deadlines to the calendar.

What the Future Holds

With a growing number of other teachers from around the world, I am a member of the active Google+ Google Classroom community. I joined the community after deciding to test-drive Google Classroom with an Academic Tools and Strategies class in the Spring Semester. One of the most successful strategies Google has worked with over the years, is to offer innovative tools, then wait for feedback via communities of users, and incorporate any ideas and suggestions that lead to improvement in the product, thus creating strong user driven momentum in development. Google Classroom is no exception. The Google+ Google Classroom community members have been vigorous in asking for, discussing, and suggesting evermore practical tools connected to their Classroom. As well as the usual discussions and questions posted by members, the Google+ Google Classroom Community offers a Google Classroom Help Centre and regular posts by the Google Classroom Experts on Google+ communities. By applying ideas offered by people who are actually using Classroom with real students, Google continues to offer an ever more satisfying experience for teacher users. One example is the recently added Invite a Teacher in Classroom, an option which allows another teacher to join and manage a class, set assignments, and perform other class management tasks. If the teacher is accustomed to using Google Classroom they can quickly gain an understanding of what the class has been doing by scrolling through announcements, assignments, and posted resources making for an extremely smooth and easy transfer of classes. The history of Google suggests that in the next few years teachers will be offered many other functions and tools to assist them in gaining even greater possibilities and centralization in their usage of the GAFE tools and Google Classroom. Speculation at what Google Classroom will be offering in the near future due to user demand includes

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the following,

- Improved grading function. Google Docs offers a grade book spreadsheet in its Sheets application, and integration of this with Google Classroom may be offered soon. Another solution could be to use an outside gradebook such as the free one offered by Learn Boost, however, the problem of personal information and entering student grades on a website outside of the domain arises.
- A Hangout style tool for teachers and students to video conference within Google Classroom.
- A quiz or test generating function. Presently, you are able to integrate some quiz generating software, such as the online learning tool Quizlet, with Classroom, however currently the developer needs to be familiar with, and able to, write a few lines of JavaScript to customize Classroom. It is also possible to create a quiz or test in Google Forms and upload it to Classroom.
- A function which allows teachers to form students into small groups to collaborate and work as teams on class projects.

There are other several applications that are currently being discussed on the Google+ Google Classroom community that may be integrated with Google Classroom to better serve respective school and teacher needs. In the coming years, it will probably become an option to be able to considerably customize Classroom and integrate other educational tools and learning websites to match school and educational objectives.

Conclusion

Google Classroom offers a streamlined and centralized feel for class management, combined with the traditionally strong point of the Google Apps, the online collaborative potential in working on a range of academic tasks. The fact that Google Classroom is located right together with our other Google Apps in the GAFE set up, suggests that it will prove to be convenient and valuable in speeding up the flow involved with many of our classroom tasks. It also provides opportunities for teachers to offer creative and stimulating assignments, to challenge students by giving us the potential to be able to freely combine original templates, links, videos, and collaborative experiences into a single task. Google Classroom development is also largely user driven, and Google is currently working hard to cultivate its presence in the educational world, which suggests further development in the capability and range of the GAFE tools. Classroom stays in the background simplifying and fast-tracking management, allowing teachers to focus on

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providing students with a richer and more enjoyable learning experience. It allows for an instructor to elect to go almost completely digital and paperless in their classroom management, or to opt to incorporate the usefulness of group announcements and automated assignment deadlines with more traditional styles of handling the flow of classroom interaction.

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